

To: Senate and House Education Committees

Date: Wednesday, February 11, 2026



Re: Response to Conlon “Conversation Starter” Map and Legislative Language

Thank you for inviting testimony on the district consolidation “conversation starter” introduced last week by Chair Conlon.

At the outset, the Vermont Superintendents Association appreciates that this proposal reflects key elements raised repeatedly in our prior testimony, most notably, a more reasonable attention to scale and a clearer focus on creating school district structures that are operationally effective and efficient in the context of Vermont.

For VSA, this proposal represents an important turning point in the consolidation conversation. Earlier proposals, beginning with the five-district concept, were non-starters for our members. They failed to account for Vermont’s geography, took scale too far, and would have effectively erased local governance while likely increasing, rather than reducing, costs for taxpayers. Those proposals did not align with how school districts actually function on the ground.

This conversation starter strikes a more appropriate balance. It acknowledges the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in governance and district operations, while not moving so far away from local identity that communities feel disconnected from their schools. Democratically elected school boards could continue to play a meaningful role in decision-making and remain close to the schools and communities they serve. While we cannot speak today to the specific borders drawn in the proposal, we do recognize this as a far more earnest and grounded starting point.

Even though we do not have a uniform solution to education reform that all superintendents would support given the context each exists within, VSA has been clear that change is needed. We will not oppose progress in the name of “the way we’ve always done things.” At the same time, we believe it is important to reiterate that district consolidation is not an end in and of itself. Consolidation must be a means to broader reform, focused on achieving the right scale at every level, improving the quality and breadth of opportunities available to students, and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education regardless of where they live.

We also want to acknowledge the proposal’s general approach to contracting and designation. While we cannot yet speak to the specifics, we agree with the underlying recognition that Vermont’s historic academies and certain independent schools have long played an important role in serving regions without access to local public schools. That said, preserving inefficient governance and operational structures solely to maintain access to independent schools should not be the policy goal. We urge the Legislature to explore alternatives to the supervisory union structure that respect the role of historic academies within the broader education delivery system, while avoiding outdated structures that are not serving students or taxpayers well. [Once again, the idea that school districts are the more efficient governance model is a very commonly held belief by VSA superintendents, but not unanimously agreed to.]

As this conversation moves forward, VSA believes it will be critical to support policy decisions with careful analysis and data. In particular, we recommend further examination of the following questions:

- What new opportunities, programs, and efficiencies could realistically be achieved across larger districts by building on the strongest offerings that currently exist in individual systems?
- How will the transition be supported for districts, families, students, and communities?
- How will local governance be determined?
- What would the proposed districts look like from a collective bargaining perspective, and what would it take to align contracts across new districts, both monetarily and logistically?
- Given concerns about lower-spending districts experiencing tax increases under Act 73, what are the projected tax implications of the proposed districts when interacting with the new foundation formula and the homesite exemption?
- What debts and assets would each system be contending with?

Another essential next step is being candid about the timeline and the scope of work required to successfully consolidate districts. Meaningful consolidation does not happen on paper alone. It requires time for governance transitions, contract alignment, staffing decisions, financial system integration, community engagement, and trust-building. Superintendents caution that setting unrealistic timelines risks undermining the very efficiencies and opportunities consolidation is meant to achieve. An honest, phased implementation plan will be necessary if this work is to be successful and sustainable.

We also want to be very clear that school construction aid will be a prerequisite to the success of any meaningful reform. Without addressing the condition, capacity, and flexibility of school facilities, even the most thoughtful governance changes will fall short. Our students deserve learning environments that support the educational opportunities policymakers are trying to create.

Finally, we want to address a recurring critique of past consolidation efforts, particularly Act 46—that promised savings and expanded opportunities were not realized. We hear a different story from superintendents who have experienced successful mergers. They witnessed reinvestment of resources into student opportunities, increased flexibility in staffing and building use, and more resilient systems overall. While education spending has increased statewide, there is no credible way to causally attribute that increase to Act 46 mergers. No one can say what education spending would look like today had those mergers not occurred.

What is clear is that Vermont's current governance structures are overly complex and increasingly misaligned with declining enrollment. Reforming those structures must be part of a broader strategy to increase student opportunity, improve system sustainability, and provide long-term relief to taxpayers. The public deserves to see a clear throughline between governance reform and operational changes to improved outcomes for students and property tax relief over time.

This proposal is an important starting point, and VSA is committed to supporting the work of the General Assembly as this critical work progresses.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.